

Opinion

Growing up with gay parents: What is the big deal?*

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A very large body of social science research going back decades has documented the vital and unique role of mothers and of fathers in childhood development. These studies have also demonstrated the negative psychological, educational, and social effects on children who have been deprived of growing up in a home with both biological parents who are married to each other.

A very brief summary of findings on the mothers' unique and crucial role in childhood development would include these points:

1. Infants and toddlers prefer their mothers to their fathers when they seek solace or relief from hunger, fear, sickness, or some other distress;
2. Mothers tend to be more soothing;
3. Mothers are more responsive to the distinctive cries of infants: they are better able than fathers, for example, to distinguish between their baby's cry of hunger and cry of pain;
4. They are also better than fathers at detecting their children's emotions by looking at their faces, postures, and gestures. Not surprisingly, then,

5. Children who were deprived of maternal care during extended periods in their early lives "lacked feeling, had superficial relationships, and exhibited hostile or antisocial tendencies" as they developed into adulthood. (Kobak 1999)

Clinical experience would suggest that motherlessness, while not studied as extensively as fatherlessness, causes even greater damage to a child, because the role of the mother is so crucial in establishing a child's ability to trust and to feel safe in relationships.

Fathers also bring an array of distinctive talents to the parenting enterprise.

1. Fathers excel when it comes to providing discipline and play and challenging their children to embrace life's challenges;
2. Fathers provide essential role models for boys;
3. A father's presence in the home protects a child from fear and strengthens a child's ability to feel safe.

The extensive research on the serious psychological, academic, and social problems in youth raised in fatherless families demonstrates the importance of the presence of the father in the home for healthy childhood development.

* Aleteia, December 2, 2014. Revised version used with permission (<http://www.aleteia.org/en/lifestyle/article/growing-up-with-gay-parents-whats-the-big-deal-1-5869643663147008>).

Let us look, then, at some of the larger, well-designed studies that have shown the risks experienced by children who were deprived of growing up in a home with both biological parents who were married to each other.

1. A 2013 Canadian study (Allen 2013), which analyzed data from a very large population-based sample, revealed that the children of gay and lesbian couples are only about 65 percent as likely to have graduated from high school as are the children of married, opposite-sex couples. The girls are more apt to struggle academically than the boys. Daughters of lesbian “parents” displayed dramatically lower graduation rates. Three key findings stood out in this study: children of married, opposite-sex parents have a high graduation rate compared to the others; children of lesbian families have a very low graduation rate compared to the others; and children in the other four types of living arrangements (common law marriage, gay couple, single mother, and single father) are similar to each other and fall between the extremes of married heterosexual parents and lesbian couples.
 2. A study of 174 primary school children in Australia (Sarantakos 1996) compared the social and educational development of 58 children living in married families, 58 living with cohabiting heterosexuals, and 58 living in homosexual unions. The authors found that married couples offer the best environment for a child’s social and educational development, followed by cohabiting heterosexual couples and lastly by homosexual couples.
 3. In a study (Goldberg 2007) of 36 adults raised by lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) parents, 15 of them (42%) described challenges relating to their ability to trust other people.
 4. A study (Sirota 2009) of 68 women with gay or bisexual fathers and 68 women with heterosexual fathers found a statistically significant difference between the two groups. The women (whose average age in both groups was 29) with gay or bisexual fathers had difficulty with adult attachment issues in three areas: (1) they were less comfortable with closeness and intimacy; (2) they were less able to trust and depend on others; and (3) they experienced more anxiety in relationships compared to the women raised by heterosexual fathers (and mothers).
 5. A study (Potter 2012) in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, found that “children in same-sex parent families scored lower than their peers living in married, two-biological parent households” on two academic outcomes. Potter concluded that these differences can be attributed to higher levels of family instability in cohabiting or “married” same-sex families, compared to intact, biological married parent families. The study was based on a large, nationally representative, and random survey of school-age children.
 6. In a 2012 re-examination of a 2010 study by Rosenfeld (Allen et al. 2012) on the association between child outcomes and same-sex family structure, the researchers found that compared with traditional married households, children being raised by same-sex couples were 35 percent less likely to make normal progress through school. This difference is statistically significant at the 1 percent level.
- The conclusion of this important research—that “with respect to

normal school progress, children residing in same-sex households can be distinguished statistically from those in traditional married homes and in heterosexual cohabiting households”—is consistent with Sarantakos’ well-designed study of 174 primary school children in Australia.

7. A ground-breaking study from the University of Texas at Austin (Regnerus 2012) found that young-adult children (ages 18–39) of parents who had same-sex relationships before the subjects had reached the age of 18 were more likely to suffer from a broad range of emotional and social problems. The study is noteworthy for several reasons: (1) his study sample was large, representative, and population-based (not a small, self-selected group); (2) Regnerus studied the responses of adult children rather than asking same-sex parents to describe how their young dependent children are doing; and (3) he was able to draw comparisons on up to 80 measures for children who had lived with (or had) parents who fell into one of eight categories—intact families with both biological parents who were married to each other, lesbian mothers, gay fathers, heterosexual single parents, parents who later divorced, cohabiting parents, parents who adopted the respondent, and other (such as a deceased parent). The children of lesbians and gays fared worse than those in intact heterosexual families on 77 of the 80 outcome measures. Exceptions related only to the voting habits of children with gay fathers, and alcohol use by children of lesbian mothers.
8. In recent years, married or cohabiting gay and lesbian couples have acquired children through artificial insemination or in vitro fertilization. Research published in 2010 (Marquardt et al. 2010) demonstrated some of the negative consequences to donor-conceived individuals: on average, young adults conceived through artificial insemination were more confused, felt more isolated from their families, were experiencing more psychic pain, and fared worse in areas such as depression, delinquency, and substance abuse than a matched group of children who were conceived naturally.
9. Men in gay unions are now also seeking biologically related children through the use of surrogate mothers. A 2013 study of children conceived through surrogate mothers by (Golombok et al. 2013) comparing them to children born through egg donation, donor insemination, and natural conception. The children were evaluated at ages 3, 7, and 10. The study demonstrated that children gestated by a surrogate had higher adjustment difficulties at age 7 than the other children. The authors concluded that the absence of a gestational connection to the mother may be problematic for children. The lead researcher stated, “signs of adjustment problems could be behaviour problems, such as aggressive or antisocial behaviour, or emotional problems, such as anxiety or depression.”
10. In a 2015 study (Sullins 2015a) using a representative sample of 207,007 children, including 512 with same-sex parents, from the US National Health Interview Survey, emotional problems were over twice as prevalent (minimum risk ratio (RR) 2.4, 95%confidence interval (CI) 1.7–3.0) for children with same-sex parents than for children with opposite-sex parents.
11. Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder was more than twice (RR 2.4,

95% CI 1.6–3.4) as prevalent among children with same-sex parents than in the general population, after controlling for age, sex, ethnicity, and parent socio-economic status (Sullins 2015b).

How can one reconcile these significant findings with the widely publicized studies showing no harmful effects to children who have, or have lived with, lesbian or gay parents?

For example, in 2005, the American Psychological Association (APA) issued an official brief on lesbian and gay parenting, which included this assertion: “Not a single study has found children of lesbian and gay parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents” (American Psychological Association 2005).

However, a 2012 research study of the APA Brief and its bibliography by L. Marks stated that this strong assertion made by the APA was not empirically warranted. Twenty-six of 59 APA studies on same-sex parenting had no heterosexual comparison groups. And in comparison studies, single mothers were often used as the heterosexual comparison group. In none of the 59 published studies were the definitive claims substantiated. The author recommended further research.

Major flaws exist in the vast majority of studies published before 2012 on this subject (Marks 2012) including the fact that they relied upon small, nonrepresentative samples that are not representative of children in typical homosexual families in the United States.

Two major studies, published by Gartrell and Bos (2010) and Biblarz and Stacey (2010), are often cited by gay activists and extensively in the media. These studies claim that no psychological damage occurs to children who were

deliberately deprived of the benefits of gender complementarity in a home with a father and a mother. The article by Gartrell and Bos relies solely on self-reports of the lesbian mothers who were aware of the political agenda behind the study.

Similarly, in the research done by Biblarz and Stacey, in 31 of the 33 studies of two-parent families, it was the parents who provided the data, which consisted of subjective judgments. As with the Gartrell and Bos study, this created a social desirability bias, because the lesbian parents knew full well why the study was being done.

In a 2015 analysis (Sullins 2015c), studies, which recruited samples of children in same-sex unions, showed that 79.3 percent (range: 75–83) of comparisons were favorable to children with same-sex parents. In comparison, there were no favorable comparisons (0%, range 0–0) in studies that used random sampling. The evidence suggested strong bias resulting in false positive outcomes for parent-reported measures in recruited samples of same-sex parents.

An objective examination of social science research into how families function reveals clearly that children do best when raised by both a mother and a father and fully supports this statement by the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger when he headed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith:

the absence of complementarity in these unions (same sex) creates obstacles in the normal development of children who would be placed in the care of such persons. They would be deprived of the experience of either fatherhood or motherhood. Allowing children to be adopted by persons living in such unions would actually mean doing violence to these children, in the sense that the condition of dependency would be used to place them in an

environment that is not conducive to their full human development.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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